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Iraqi Engineer Employee Capacity Development Reaches New High at Camp Blackadder

By Erich Langer
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BASRAH, Iraq – U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Basra Area Office Engineer Dan Foltz had some bitter sweet moments recently as he met with his Iraqi associates for likely the last time. Foltz, completing his second tour in Iraq was packing, tying up loose ends and administratively 'closing the loop' on his portfolio of 140 plus projects with area office staff…all, as he prepared to redeploy.

The cavalry and fresh horses were reported on their way but reinforcements wouldn't be posted to Basra before Dan left theater.

With no overlap - it was expected to take three weeks or more - Foltz was busy helping set up everyone for success; but, he was especially cognizant of his relationship with his Iraqi project engineers who won't miss a beat on managing their portfolio of important reconstruction projects in Basra and Mayson governates.

The rubber meets the road with the Iraqi engineers – the foot soldiers of USACE.

The Corps' eyes and ears on reconstruction sites belong to select members of the Iraqi engineer team. The security situation in Iraq and sheer number of projects assigned to U.S. engineers and staff further define the integral role of Gulf Region South (GRS) district's Iraqi engineers.

"Throughout my time here, I've had the opportunity to work with great individuals – good people helping with the future of Iraq," said Foltz as he addressed 20 of his Iraqi engineers. "I'll redeploy very soon. Unfortunate for me; but, this is an opportunity for you to take what I have done for you and to share with my replacement and an opportunity for him to learn from you."

Although Foltz and Deputy Resident Engineer Al had worked hard to mentor and teach the Iraqi engineer team about USACE engineering techniques, standards and procedures, their effort remains a continuing process. BAO project engineers interact with contractors, end users and others as they incorporate USACE construction standards, schedules and the all important "scope of work" into projects.

"Since we began work for GRS in 2004, our team has done a great job in many sectors: electricity; water; health; education, security and justice," said Engineer Al as he proudly reflected on mega watts of power, cubic meters of potable water, miles of roads, police stations, border forts and health clinics constructed with the help of his fellow Iraqi engineers. "Our projects are completed by the high standards set by GRS; thanks to all of our quality assurance engineers who are on projects every day."

Foltz and Engineer Al spearheaded the combination of several Iraqi engineer staffs previously posted to other BAO resident offices. The security situation and other administrative requirements necessitated the Iraqi engineering staff coming together at BAO.

"Within a short period of time we had our Iraqi engineers reporting to BAO," said Foltz who explained that it was a difficult time as the team adjusted to expectations and the new personnel relationships that had to be forged.

Understanding the importance of work relationships, Foltz decided to quickly act to stabilize the situation. "In this culture trust is essential; it sometimes takes a long time to earn but can quickly deteriorate," he said. "Also, individuals senior in age command more respect because they are perceived to have more knowledge and experience."

This may or may not be the case, but it is a truism in Iraq.

He decided to conduct elections and let his Iraqi engineers select team leaders. The Iraqi engineering team sorted out leadership issues among themselves; resulting in a work environment that benefited the engineers and BAO's mission.

Foltz has used monthly "all hands" Iraqi engineer gatherings as opportunities to interact with staff and to encourage them to mentor and educate Iraqi contractors and other engineers about their experiences.

"You can help continue making better projects for a better long-term Iraq. I want you to use your experiences," continued Foltz. "The USACE has a different set of expectations on project completion and safety than historically accepted here. And, although it is possible for construction to last 2,000 or 3,000 years in Iraq, USACE doesn't ask for that level!"

But, I want to visit Iraq in the future and see the projects you have built. These projects – your projects and those you will impact—if constructed properly can last 25, 50 or 100 years."

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